

# CLIL: THE ADDED VALUE TO ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION FOR YOUNG LEARNERS

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**Abstract:** As teaching English to young learners (TEYL) of primary school age becomes engendered in more national curricula across Europe, deep reflection is required of those involved in teacher education as to how language teachers should be prepared for the reality of the primary educational context when it is they that are entrusted with this responsibility. In order to avoid the potential pitfalls often brought about when a new ‘subject’ enters a curriculum, such as isolation and disjuncture, teacher education for primary English language teachers needs to consider educational approaches that embrace the ethos of holistic, interdisciplinary learning which is at the heart of primary education. One such approach is Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), in which school subjects are taught through a foreign language. This paper examines the potential contribution of CLIL to English language teacher education programmes given that its underlying principles and methodology focus on the combined development of Content, Communication, Cognition and Culture, all vital elements in the primary curriculum. CLIL obliges language teachers to look beyond language and address other essential learner needs. It improves teachers’ knowledge of the primary curriculum, makes them aware of the responsibility to educate the ‘whole’ child, develops their understanding of the cognitive and linguistic demands of this level of education, and the important role of language across the curriculum. CLIL also unites language and generalist (primary) teachers in partnerships where they work together to achieve broad educational goals. A consideration of CLIL in foreign language teacher education is necessary if primary English language teachers are to make a meaningful contribution to the education of young learners in primary school contexts.

**Keywords:** CLIL; ELT; TEYL; 4Cs; English language teacher education; integration.

## 1 - Introduction

The provision of foreign language education, and English in particular, for young learners in mainstream primary school contexts has grown rapidly in recent decades (see Enever 2011; Garton, Copeland & Burns, 2011; Enever, Moon &

Raman 2009 for overviews and related studies). Reasons for this are numerous and point to a combination of social, economic and political factors, the consequences of globalisation, which have made languages important human and economic capital, and necessitated higher mastery of them for the purposes of work and study in Europe and beyond. This has resulted in policy change and directives from European supra-national institutions to enhance multilingualism (e.g., the European Commission's (1995) white paper, 'Teaching and Learning: Towards the Learning Society', and Action Plan 2004 - 2006, 'Promoting Language Learning and Linguistic Diversity' (European Commission 2003) which incorporated the mother-tongue plus two other languages initiative (MT + 2) from an early age) and forced measures to be taken by ministries of education to improve standards of foreign language education. National governments have responded with a range of initiatives which include lowering the age of the onset of foreign language learning to pre- and primary schools, and English medium instruction (EMI).

The early start initiative has been the most widely implemented and is based largely on uncontested assumptions that 'younger is better' and the notion of a 'critical period' in childhood after which it is believed that languages are more difficult to acquire. This has its strongest support in the area of pronunciation (Scovel 2000). However, academic debate suggests that this argument is no longer legitimate and it is widely accepted that older learners are quicker, efficient language learners owing to their cognitive and meta-cognitive maturity (see Singleton 2001; Nikolov & Djigunovic 2006; Marinova-Todd *et al.* 2000; Larsen-Freeman & Long 1991 for discussion on this). Early language learning can, however, help to foster positive attitudes towards languages and cultures, introduce and nurture the concept of global citizenship and the importance of intercultural understanding. Stakeholder views, including those of parents, and echoed by political sound-bites have been fuelled by a belief that a good grasp of the English language offers better study and work opportunities for young people. Lowering the age of English language learning has indeed been a vote winner all-round.

However, provision of English language lessons in primary schools has not always been synonymous with quality. In many contexts, teacher education has not preceded swift implementation. There have not been enough qualified teachers for the job, and teaching has often been left to methodologically under-prepared language teachers, initially trained to teach in different cycles of education or others recruited on the basis of their language proficiency alone, which may be rudimentary at its best, but considered 'enough' for primary level. In addition, the position of English language lessons at the end of the school day in some contexts has led to isolation of these teachers and the language, and confined their status to that of 'visitor'. Numerous other negative factors contribute to these scenarios including lack of coherence in programmes and dialogue between teachers from one cycle of education to the next, and little or no horizontal collaboration between generalist and language teachers working within the same school contexts. As a consequence, the early start is not always reflected in improved marks and quality

performance in long-term national and European assessment of foreign language levels, having the opposite effect to that originally intended.

It is now also acknowledged that a delivery gap exists between what teacher education provides, what English language teachers do and what their learners need (Marsh 2002: 49). The youth of today live by the principle of 'learn now, use now' which applies to languages as much as it does to new technologies. This means that teachers from all cycles of education need to consider ways of meeting their learners' needs, and teachers of young learners are no exception to this. English language teaching methodology for young learners needs to be problematised for its appropriacy for current school contexts and a generation of learner born into an already globalised world. This learner needs to develop a broad range of competences which involve learning to use languages and using languages to learn (Marsh 2000).

## **2 - Popular methodology for Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL)**

A popular conception of teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) has tended to limit content to a few lexical sets (colours, numbers, animals) using strategies which focus on the memorisation of these words and their recall using flashcards and memory games, with further exposure through stories and songs. Methodological choices favour Total Physical Response with children responding in a variety of ways - actions, gesture, colouring - in order to demonstrate their understanding of input given in the foreign language. This is frequently done in isolation from the rest of the curriculum.

Priority is given to the development of aural/oral skills though this is limited to bite-sized pieces of language selected for its simplicity and adhering, where structures are involved, to a grammatical hierarchy. Exposure to the language is limited, highly controlled and somewhat 'artificial'. It is also cognitively undemanding. Children do not learn their first language like this. They do not learn five or six new words at a time and then move on to another lot, nor does the rest of school learning mirror this. Children should be given the opportunity to use the language in meaningful contexts where there is a need for it, otherwise "language structures and functions are likely to be learned as abstractions devoid of conceptual or communicative value" (Brinton *et al.* 1989: 202).

More integrated approaches to learning foreign languages have been attempted through 'cross-curricular', 'activity' and 'theme-based' learning' (see Brewster, Ellis & Girard 1992; Vale & Feunteun 1995; Cameron 2001) as well as borrowing techniques from other curricular areas (see Halliwell 1992) such as the use of small surveys leading to the production of graphs common to Maths, and small science experiments, all of which are centred on developing language competences whilst also serving to develop and reinforce other skills and concepts. Such approaches involve practical experiences where children are provided with plenty of exposure to the language and opportunities to use it all. The theme/activity provides contextual support for understanding language and key intellectual concepts.

Added to these approaches, though far less implemented, is Content and

Language Integrated Learning (CLIL), an educational approach where school curricular content is taught through an additional language, usually a foreign language. In CLIL, it is the content that drives the learning and determines the language used to communicate understanding of it. Language aims in CLIL centre mainly around developing cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) as well as basic interpersonal language competences (BICS) (see Cummins 1979). The cognitive challenge in CLIL is high as learners have to interpret often complex concepts as well as the language used to do this in order to construct meaning. Opportunities must be provided for learners to develop this understanding and communicate it through the foreign language. CLIL requires teachers to have 'multidisciplinary mindsets' as opposed to 'subject-specific' ones, to be both 'language' and 'content sensitive' as CLIL is neither subject teaching or language teaching, but a fusion of both.

From the perspective of foreign language teaching, CLIL is seen as a means of renewing interest in foreign languages and of fulfilling European ideals of MT+2 in the most pragmatic, economical way. Yet CLIL is often dismissed as something of a 'trend', or far too complex and complicated to implement. In addition, there is the fear that children will somehow miss out on learning important content and language in their mother-tongue and will underperform at school. However, these fears have been allayed through research which suggests that learners in CLIL programmes do as well, if not better, than their non-CLIL peers, (Mehisto *et al.* 2008: 20) and mother-tongue coverage of content and language can be maintained by opting for a modular approach as opposed to entire subjects taught through the foreign language.

CLIL comes in many different forms owing to the variety of contexts in which it is implemented. This 'flexibility' relates to aims and models, amount of CLIL, subjects taught and content involved, as well as teachers - content, language or both who are involved in preparation and actual classroom teaching. There is no 'one-size fits all'. This is also one of the reasons why it is not prevalent. The absence of a single template has meant that ministries of education have stopped short of implementation despite considerable endorsement from European supra-national institutions. This has led to a largely grassroots movement driven mainly by enthusiastic school governing bodies, willing, courageous teachers and supportive parents convinced of the long-term benefits to further study, job opportunities and social aspirations. But for learners, it is the instant gains from CLIL that are the most attractive, namely the immediate use of the foreign language in the classroom for a genuine purpose. This appeals to the restless, techno-savvy, impatient youth of today who want it, and want to use it now, not later. Relevance is key and motivation, paramount. To dismiss CLIL in practice or even in theory, would be to ignore the very great potential this educational approach has to developing multiple competences in both children and teachers, its contribution to curriculum development, and teacher education for foreign language and content teachers.

## **2. The contribution of CLIL**

CLIL is grounded on solid learning principles drawing on second language acquisition, cognitive theory and socio-constructivism of learning. According to Coyle (2002: 27-28), CLIL promotes four key principles:

1. It places content or subject learning and the acquisition of knowledge, skills and understanding inherent to that discipline at the very heart of the learning process;
2. Language is a conduit for communication and learning;
3. CLIL should cognitively challenge learners - whatever their ability. It provides a rich setting for developing thinking skills in conjunction with both basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive-academic language proficiency (CALP);
4. CLIL embraces pluriculturalty. Since language, thinking and culture are inextricably linked, CLIL provides an ideal opportunity for students to operate in alternative cultures through studies in an alternative language.

Active demonstration of these four principles through the practical application of CLIL may confer a number of benefits to the wider society, learners and teachers. Among these are the potential increase in foreign language users, positive attitudes to languages, social inclusion, opportunities for study and work in international contexts, all of which support linguistic diversity, and improve cultural awareness and intercultural understanding (Marsh 1998: 53; Marsh 2002: 173; Muñoz 2002: 36; Coyle 2007: 548; Lasagabaster 2008: 31; Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2009: 14-15). For learners, benefits are affective, cognitive, linguistic and communicative, as CLIL necessitates active participation and collaboration, problem-solving and risk-taking, higher levels of concentration and develops a broader capacity to think (see Marsh 2000: 8; Muñoz 2002: 36; Dalton-Puffer 2008: 143; Pavón & Gaustad, 2013: 84; Lasagabaster 2008: 31). As CLIL is neither content teaching nor language teaching, but a combination of both, it presents teachers with new professional challenges which involve them adjusting their practice, methodology and perspectives of how content may be taught and the role of language in this process. In addition, they may acquire a better understanding of curricular content and subject knowledge, new techniques and strategies to develop and support learning, enhanced ability to select and design tasks and materials, a heightened consciousness of learners' linguistic needs and cognitive development. They also become more language sensitive, of their own linguistic competence, and of the importance of language as a tool to transmit content and communicate understanding, not only with regard to the foreign language, but also their mother-tongue. CLIL also brings teachers together (language and

content) to form partnerships where knowledge of each other's subject and methodological expertise may be shared in order to fulfill broad educational goals (see Pavón & Ellison 2013). CLIL is included in the recommendations of The European Framework for Language Teacher Education (Kelly *et al.* 2004: 77) and also in the 'Can do' statements for lesson planning of the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages: A Reflection tool for language teacher education (Newby *et al.* 2007) providing endorsement for its inclusion in teacher education programmes for foreign languages in national contexts.

The abovementioned principles of CLIL, which may be summarised as 4Cs - Content, Communication, Cognition and Culture, provide a conceptual framework which also encompasses a curriculum and methodology (see Table 1. below).

Content	Integrating content from across the curriculum through high-quality language interaction
Cognition	Engaging learners through creativity, higher-order thinking, and knowledge processing
Communication	Using language to learn and mediate ideas, thoughts and values
Culture	Interpreting and understanding the significance of content and language and their contribution to identity and citizenship

**Table 1:** The 4Cs curriculum (Coyle *et al.* 2009: 12)

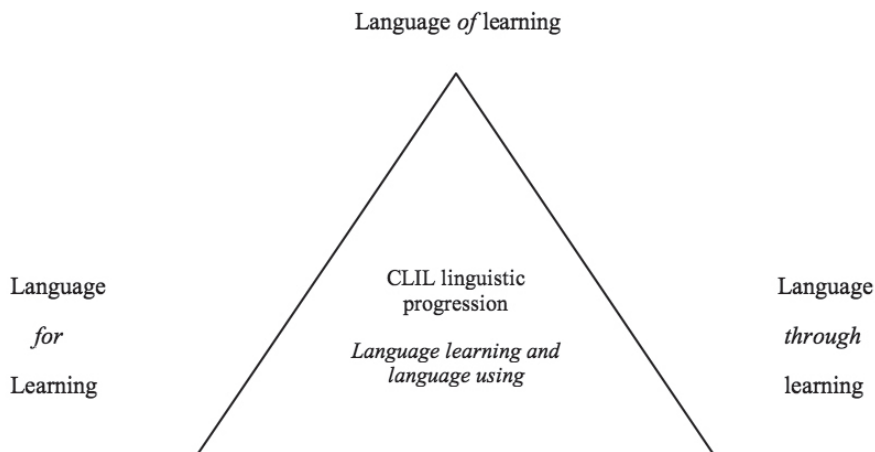
Inherent in the above, is the perspective of education as holistic, integrationist and inter-disciplinary which is synonymous with that of primary education. In addition, the 4Cs are aligned to a 21st century view of education which is competence-based, innovative and thinking-centered.

The 4Cs framework is extremely useful in pre- and in-service teacher education for primary English language teachers for a number of reasons. Firstly, it helps to reinforce the concept of integrated education at the level of curricula, teaching and teacher collaboration, and learning. It emphasises the areas of teacher responsibility, which are not solely those of primary generalist teachers, but of all who are part of this community, and that includes primary English language teachers who must be aware that their responsibility goes beyond teaching the English language. This will be enhanced if teacher education incorporates practica which involve collaboration with generalist teachers who may be involved in the observation procedures as observers of language teachers and observed by them. Through this, primary English language student-teachers may gain a better perspective of the demands of mother-tongue teaching on young children in relation to the 4Cs as well as draw on content, and methodologies which may be transferred to the English language classroom. In turn, generalist teachers may also

benefit from techniques and strategies used to enhance language development. In addition, having an in-depth awareness of the primary curriculum and being able to develop linguistic knowledge of this in English will greatly enhance classroom learning and foster plurilingualism.

The uniqueness of CLIL methodology comes from the fusion of the knowledge bases of both the foreign language and the content subject. This makes it complex and demanding for whoever is involved in teaching it. Some seven knowledge bases have been identified in the literature (see Ellison 2014): 1) content knowledge of the subject matter; 2) pedagogic knowledge of generic teaching strategies, the how to, including classroom management, and the why behind this which includes beliefs about teaching and learning; 3) pedagogic content knowledge - the how to related to the teaching of the specific content including methods, materials, assessment; 4) support knowledge – the knowledge of the disciplines that inform an approach to teaching and learning such as linguistics, second language acquisition (SLA) and psychology, research methods 5) curricular knowledge (of the official curriculum and resources); 6) contextual knowledge (of learners, the school and wider community); and 7) process knowledge (consisting of enabling skills – ability to relate to learners, other teachers and parents; study skills, collaborative skills, inquiry skills – for observation and self-evaluation; and meta-processing – of self-awareness and self-management). Teacher education for primary English language teachers that incorporates CLIL could involve a comparative analysis of these knowledge bases. This would help identify similarities and differences between ELT and primary content teaching, how these fields can merge into CLIL and the subsequent implications of this for practice to account for the integrated, dual focus on content and language. This would further develop understanding of primary education as a whole and of the reciprocal benefits to English language lessons and the primary curriculum.

Using the 4Cs as a framework for planning units of work and lessons for CLIL with the content of the primary curriculum, whether as a theoretical exercise or for practical application, would provide content, linguistic, cognitive, and cultural awareness-building for language teachers. It can also lead to a heightened awareness of language even for these teachers as it forces a consideration of language demands *of, for* and *through* learning encompassed in the ‘C’ for Communication, as conceptualised by the ‘Language Triptych’ (see Figure 1 below). This is a challenge, even for language teachers, and serves as a good exercise in language analysis. Such disciplined activity may be transferred to the preparation for English language teaching, making it richer by encouraging a focus on all 4Cs and a consideration of scaffolding strategies for each which calls attention to both learner and teacher needs and competences.



**Figure 1:** The Language Triptych (from Coyle *et al.* 2010: 36)

Drawing on research conducted in 2010 - 2011 by the author of this paper (Ellison 2014) which involved primary English language teachers engaged in the study and practice of CLIL during the MA practicum of a masters degree in teaching English and another foreign language in basic education at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities of the University of Porto, it was concluded that there are many benefits from an inclusion of CLIL in English language teacher education which are compatible with those stated by Kelly *et al.* (2004). Amongst these are that: it affords ELT teachers a more holistic view of teaching and learning which is not restricted to a single subject; it reduces 'disjuncture' between teachers (language and generalists) and within curricula (Mehisto 2008); it provides for more contextualised language acquisition and learning; it broadens methodological awareness; it makes teachers more aware of general pedagogic skills and strategies to manage learning and interaction, provide clear instructions and allow learners time to think; it develops competences for supporting language and cognition; it encourages experimentation with technology and task and materials design; it makes teachers aware of their own language needs and use, as well as those of their learners. It helped the teachers in this study to identify and fill gaps in their language lessons such as providing for more meaningful, authentic content and a purpose for using language, as well as opportunities for the development of more higher order thinking by asking cognitively appropriate, scaffolded questions, and supporting constructive learning and communication in group tasks. Above all else, it helped language teachers and primary generalists to broaden their perspectives and learn new ways of teaching and learning together which is a necessary and vital component of life-long learning and teacher education.



### 3 - End note

Teaching English to young learners in mainstream state primary schools has increased dramatically in recent years, yet it has not always been preceded by appropriate teacher education which has prepared English language teachers for the primary context. In the meantime, young learners and their needs have changed, and so have those of the knowledge society they inhabit, where authentic use of foreign languages in real contexts, including school, is more prevalent. Teacher education for primary English language teachers must account for such change in the educational approaches to teaching languages that it examines within its programmes, and the contexts in which these may be practised. Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) is one such approach which merits inclusion in teacher education for primary English language teachers owing to its integrationist, holistic principles which align with those of primary education. An analysis of its principles and methodology which incorporate the 4Cs of Content, Communication, Cognition and Culture are essential pre-requisites for English language teachers so that they may acquire a fuller sense of responsibility for teaching in the primary context, and develop lessons, whether CLIL or English language, which may provide added value to young learners.

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